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# **Violence, self-worth, solidarity and stigma: how a dissident, far-right group solves the collective action problem**

## **John Meadowcroft**

Senior Lecturer in Public Policy, Department of Political Economy

King's College London, London, UK

Email: john.meadowcroft@kcl.ac.uk

## **Elizabeth Morrow**

Research Fellow, Department of Political Science and International Studies

University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

Email: e.morrow@bham.ac.uk

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**Abstract:** *How do dissident, far-right groups overcome the collective action problem inherent to political organisation in order to recruit sufficient activists willing to bear the costs of participation and not free-ride on the participation of others? An original ethnographic study of the UK anti-Islamic street protest organisation, the English Defence League (EDL), shows that it solved the collective action problem by supplying selective incentives to members in the form of the club goods of access to violence, increased self-worth and group solidarity. These benefits were offset against the costs of stigma, time, money and unwanted police attention that also accompanied EDL membership. The personal benefits the EDL provided to its members enabled it to supply what Olson termed the first unit of collective action, but limited its ability to supply the additional units required to build a broader, more mainstream movement.*

How do dissident, far right groups overcome the collective action problem inherent to political organisation to recruit sufficient activists willing to bear the costs of participation and not free-ride on the participation of others? Organisation to achieve political ends, whether the electoral strategy of a democratic political party or the revolutionary overthrow of a despotic regime, faces an inherent collective action problem because the benefits of political action accrue to participants and non-participants, whereas the costs are borne by participants alone. Consequently, it will be in each individual's self-interest to free-ride on the political activism of others rather than directly participate in costly political action (Olson, 1965; Lichbach, 1994; 1995; Tullock, 1971).

A number of scholars have analysed how dissident and extremist organisations seek to overcome this collective action problem – although this approach has not hitherto been applied to far right extremism. Dissident organisations are said to solve the collective action problem by providing selective incentives that are exclusive to members (Lichbach, 1994; 1995; Wintrobe, 2006). These exclusive benefits are supplied as club goods – that is, goods that are neither purely public nor purely private, but may be supplied exclusively to many people (Buchanan, 1965) – and can include welfare, education, social entertainment and access to friendship networks. If the exclusive benefits supplied outweigh the costs of participation for a sufficient number of people then the group should prosper (Berman and Laitin, 2008; Iannaccone, 1992; Wintrobe, 2006).

While to external observers the ideology of a dissident group may appear to be the driver of participation, it is argued that ideology does not motivate participation, but instead binds together those who become participants and facilitates the supply of exclusive benefits.

Hence, the process of group membership will involve socialisation into the ideology of the group and it is via this process that members obtain selective benefits like group solidarity (Berman and Laitin, 2008; Lichbach, 1995; Wintrobe 2006).

This article analyses how one such organisation, the English Defence League (EDL), a street protest group established in 2009 ostensibly to oppose the spread of Islamist ideas and practices in the UK, overcame the collective action problem to build a relatively effective political organisation. Original ethnographic data is used to show that the EDL exclusively supplied the club goods of access to violent conflict, increased self-worth and group solidarity to members. These benefits of EDL membership were offset against the costs of membership, notably stigma, time, money and unwelcome police attention. Ideology played an important unifying role within the group, and facilitated the supply of increased self-worth and group solidarity, but was not the driving force behind membership. We also show that the way that the EDL solved the collective action problem limited the long-term success of the organisation.

This study utilises ethnographic fieldwork conducted within the EDL between February 2013 and February 2014 that was part of a broader study of the group (Morrow 2015). EDL demonstrations were attended in English cities including Manchester, London, Newcastle, Birmingham, and Slough, as well as private 'meet-and-greet' sessions for new and prospective members and social gatherings at pubs. Membership of a closed EDL division's Facebook group was also obtained. In total, approximately 50 hours were spent directly interacting with EDL members in the form of participant observation and unstructured, informal interviews. A full account of the research methodology is set out in the Appendix.

This article is structured as follows: first, we introduce the English Defence League, discuss its origins and the demographic profile of its supporters, and locate it in the history of UK right-wing extremism; second, we summarise existing explanations of right-wing extremism and support for the EDL; third, we present our analysis of the exclusive benefits that the EDL supplies to members in the form of the club goods of access to violence, self-worth and group solidarity; fourth, we set out the costs of EDL membership; fifth, we discuss the interplay of costs and benefits that produce the dynamics of EDL activism; sixth, we present our argument that the way that the EDL supplied the first unit of collective action hindered its ability to supply further units, thereby limiting the ability of the organisation to grow beyond its initial membership base; and we conclude in a final section.

### **The English Defence League**

The EDL began in Luton, an English town of 200,000 people located 30 miles north of London, following a provocative demonstration by the now-banned Islamist group Al-Muhajiroun. The EDL emerged ‘out of the fringes of the English domestic football hooligan scene’ – the milieu in which followers of rival professional football teams organise violence around matches (Treadwell and Garland, 2011, p. 1; Busher, 2013; 2015; Copsey, 2010; Garland and Treadwell, 2010).

The EDL describes itself as anti-racist, open to gays and lesbians, and with Jewish and Sikh members. However, previous studies have suggested its membership is predominantly white, male and working-class (Treadwell and Garland, 2011; Copsey, 2010; Goodwin *et al*,

2016; Bartlett and Littler, 2011; Busher 2015, p. 17). These studies correspond with our own findings. At EDL demonstrations and social events almost all members were white and men outnumbered women by approximately 3 to 1. The majority of participants appeared to be in their teens or twenties. EDL members were predominately either unemployed or employed in low status occupations, such as a lorry driver, bouncer, carer, warehouse worker, factory worker, and night shift supervisor. Although notable exceptions exist – a sprinkling of Sikh members were observed, and a highly literate reader of Marx appears in Busher's (2015, p. 40) study – our research found that EDL members are primarily young, working-class, white men.

According to its Facebook page and mission statement, the EDL (nd) seeks to 'peacefully protest against militant Islam' and utilise the United Kingdom's courts and legislature to achieve its aims of protecting and promoting human rights, democracy, and the traditions of England. However, experience on the ground contradicts these claims. Since 2009 the EDL has staged over 50 demonstrations that have attracted between 500 and 5000 participants. These demonstrations have often involved significant public disorder, characterised by clashes with counter-demonstrators and the police, and missile throwing (Goodwin *et al*, 2016; Treadwell and Garland, 2011; Treadwell, 2013; 2014). EDL demonstrations are marked by prolonged chanting, not dissimilar to a football match, directed at Muslims. At a demonstration in the centre of Birmingham in 2013, for example, enthusiastic and loud chanting was witnessed throughout the EDL's march through the city. The chants included 'I'm England till I die', 'Whose streets? Our streets', 'No surrender to the Taliban', 'Shove your fucking Allah up your arse', 'Allah, Allah, who the fuck is Allah?' and 'If you wear a burqa you're a cunt'.

The evidence suggests that the EDL is an Islamophobic, right-wing extremist group.

Islamophobia has been defined as 'indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims' (Bleich, 2011). Political extremism is usually understood to involve anti-constitutional and anti-democratic positions, while xenophobia and an intolerance of diversity are typically seen as characteristics of specifically 'right-wing' extremism (Eatwell, 2000; 2003; Eatwell and Goodwin, 2010). Indiscriminate hostility towards Muslims was consistently observed throughout the fieldwork, for example in the obscene anti-Muslim chanting described above and at a private meeting in Wolverhampton when a senior EDL member told those present that they 'can't trust a single Muslim'. EDL members repeatedly revealed xenophobia and intolerance of diversity characteristic of anti-democratic political extremism and this was also reflected in the organisation's mission statement that states that Islam is incompatible with British liberal democracy (English Defence League, nd).

The EDL is not the first UK right-wing extremist movement to utilise aggressive, street-based direct action. As far back as the 1930s, the British Union of Fascists marched through areas of London with a high concentration of Jews in a bid to intimidate and provoke the local population (Thurlow, 1998). In the 1970s, the National Front staged rallies characterised by chaos and disorder, which Taylor (1982) suggests provided members with an outlet for violence. An immediate far-right predecessor of the EDL – the British National Party – similarly pursued a strategy of 'march and grow' throughout the 1980s and 1990s, though after 1999 a new leadership attempted to curb its street presence to bring it within the norms of liberal democracy in order to win electoral support (Copsey, 2004), thereby limiting direct action opportunities for its members.



When the EDL began in 2009 it both revived the UK's legacy of right-wing, street-based activism, and heralded a new era of Islamophobic protest movements. Britain First – a self-described 'patriotic political party and street defence organisation' – formed in 2011 and has gone on to stage demonstrations, 'patrol' areas of London with a high Muslim population and 'invade' mosques to distribute its literature (Britain First, nd). In 2014, the Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the West (PEGIDA) held its first demonstration in Germany, and has since expanded to protest in France, the Netherlands, Poland and the UK, with original EDL leader Tommy Robinson addressing its UK rallies in 2016.

### **Existing explanations for right-wing extremism and EDL support**

Explanations of right-wing extremism have tended to focus on demand-side or 'externalist' explanations: here, support for right-wing extremism is explained as a consequence of the growing appeal of right-wing ideas to individuals with low socioeconomic status in reaction to social and economic change. The attitudinal and socioeconomic characteristics of these supporters are seen as the key to explaining the support garnered by specific extreme right parties in different countries (Carter, 2005; Goodwin, 2006; Mudde, 2010).

Some previous studies of the EDL have used a similar approach to explain its rise, focusing on the socioeconomic profile of members and supporters and the ideological appeal of the group. Bartlett and Littler (2011) found that most EDL supporters were under the age of 30, male, and more likely to be pessimistic, and unemployed, than the general public. Goodwin

*et al* (2016) similarly found that those who either reported being members of the EDL, or said they would consider joining, were more likely than those who rejected the values of the group to be tabloid readers, unemployed, pessimistic about intergroup relationships, strongly xenophobic and more likely to justify violence when defending their in-group from threats.

A demand-side explanation of EDL involvement can provide useful information about the characteristics of those who are attracted to the EDL, but cannot explain what separates those who join the EDL from those who possess those characteristics but do not join.

Demand-side explanations can also appear overly-deterministic in presenting participation as a passive consequence of particular socioeconomic characteristics and social change.

Supply-side or 'internalist' explanations focus on the role of the party (or movement) as a strategic actor responding to its political and institutional environment (Carter, 2005; Mudde, 2007; Goodwin, 2006). When discussing extreme right activists in Europe, Klandermans and Mayer (2006) argue that supply-side factors – such as whether the movement stages activities that are appealing to people and is likely to achieve its goals at affordable costs – can mobilise potential adherents. Our article extends the supply-side explanation as it applies to extreme right-wing movements by placing the collective action problem associated with EDL membership at the centre of the analysis.

A number of previous studies have also focused on the ideology said to motivate EDL members. Richards (2011, p. 178) argues that fears of international terrorism have 'allowed the likes of the EDL space for political mobilization'. Meleagrou-Hitchens and Brun (2013, p.

1) similarly contend that the EDL and similar movements are ‘inspired by an ideology which presents the current jihadist terrorist threat to the West as part of a centuries-long effort by Muslims to dominate Western civilisation’. Accounts of the EDL’s ideology provide useful information about the ideas around which the organisation coalesces; however, Islamophobia and fear of international terrorism are relatively widespread, yet not all those who are wary of Islam or fear terrorism join the EDL.

Indeed, some existing research suggests ideology does not always play a determinative role in extremist group participation. When discussing neo-Nazism in Norway, Fangen (1998, p. 35) notes that ‘the fantasy world of men of honour at war with real and imagined enemies... seems for some members to be more important than the... ideology’ of the group. In the context of examining terrorist group involvement, Horgan (2008, p. 87) observes that ideological commitment may strengthen over time as a result of socialisation within the group, so that focusing on external forces (such as ideology) to explain participation risks ignoring ‘the existence of real and imagined rewards for joining the terrorist group’. These observations accord with our findings, set out below, that rewards (including the indulgence of war fantasies) play an important role in generating and sustaining EDL membership.

Blee (2003) argues that racist activism often follows from immersion in a particular social context, rather than being driven by ideological belief, and that becoming involved in a racist organisation leads activists to remake themselves in a racist mould. Our study similarly found evidence of members who had not been sympathetic to the EDL’s ideology prior to joining. Samantha, a 29-year-old mother of two, explained that her boyfriend, a Regional Organiser, had drawn her into the group and educated her into its beliefs. Overhearing this

exchange between Samantha and the researcher, her boyfriend joked that 'It's all my fault.' Despite her original ignorance of the EDL's agenda, once part of the group, Samantha became an enthusiastic activist, and proudly recounted how she had led a local demonstration and designed merchandise for the group.

The one prior large-scale ethnographic study of the EDL, undertaken by Busher (2015), has strong resonance with the present study. Busher (2015, p. 8) conceives of EDL activism as a process of collective 'world making'. This concept is developed from Gould's (2009, p. 178) study of AIDS activism in the USA, and refers to 'spaces in which ongoing interactions of participants continually produce sentiments, ideas, values and practices that manifest and encourage new modes of being'. Gould (2009, p. 178) argues that collective identity and activist communities play a role in sustaining social movement participation, and that these findings 'dispute the assumptions that underlie the free-rider problem – that people are autonomous and individualized utility-maximizers'. Within our study, we agree that identity and community play important roles in sustaining movement participation but, unlike Gould, contend that identity and community are in fact incentives that a movement can offer participants as a way to overcome the free-rider problem.

Part of Busher's account (2015, pp. 37-43, 62-63) focuses on *how* people became involved in EDL activism and outlines the common routes to involvement, such as via the football hooligan scene and through traditional far right groups. We seek to complement this approach by explaining *why* people participate in groups like the EDL. The conceptual framework and empirical data utilised in this article enable a number of causal claims to be made. We know that Islamophobic views are relatively widespread, but relatively few

people who hold those views join the EDL. We argue that those who participate in the EDL do so because participation brings direct personal benefits that outweigh the personal costs. Ideology is not the driving force behind participation; rather, ideology binds the group together, and facilitates the supply of group solidarity and increased self-worth.

### **The EDL as supplier of club goods**

This study of the EDL found strong synergies with previous studies of dissident political organisations that show the importance of club goods supplied exclusively to members in motivating participation. We found that the participation of grassroots members in the EDL was driven by the consumption of the club goods of access to violent conflict, increased self-worth and group solidarity. It is unlikely that the founders and leaders of the EDL explicitly thought in terms of solving the collective action problem. Rather, we found evidence that these political actors intuitively grasped the need to supply exclusive benefits to recruit and retain activists; at a minimum it was clear that senior actors had turned their minds to how to make the experience of activism enjoyable and meaningful.

### ***Access to violence***

Busher (2015, p. 141) notes that physical confrontations with opponents were an essential element of the EDL's 'emotional alchemy'. We similarly found that a striking feature of the EDL was the important role of violence within the organisation. As noted above, the EDL emerged from the football hooligan milieu in which men engage in organised and ritualised violence surrounding football matches. We believe it is significant that the name of the EDL

leader Tommy Robinson is in fact a pseudonym of Stephen Yaxley-Lennon and is also the name of the leader of the Luton hooligan firm and author of a number of books that describe first-hand accounts of football hooliganism. Robinson (2015, pp. 166-7) has written that he chose this pseudonym to protect his anonymity and 'to give some stick' to the original Robinson for using his own (Yaxley-Lennon's) real name in a book about the Luton hooligan firm. We believe this pseudonym can also be interpreted as a deliberate signal to the hooligan cognoscenti about the nature of the EDL; the EDL led by Tommy Robinson from Luton would surely provide opportunities for physical confrontation akin to those available within hooligan firms.

Treadwell and Garland (2011, p. 621) describe EDL members as 'a group of young males who regularly use racially and religiously motivated violence'. The three young men in their study had all previously been members of football hooligan firms and all reported using racial violence during their time as EDL members. Busher (2015, p. 38) also found that up to 30-40 per cent of EDL members had links to football hooliganism. The present study also repeatedly found evidence of the link between the EDL and football hooligan firms. Allan<sup>1</sup>, a 54-year-old man who joined the EDL in 2009 and worked his way up to become a Regional Organiser by 2014, explained after a protest in Bristol in February 2013 that he was formerly a member of the Luton Town hooligans. He said that all the young men who had attended that day's protest were 'into football' and that he had heard about the first EDL counter-demonstration against al-Muhajiroun in Luton from his old hooligan friends. Similarly, at a meeting at a Leicester pub in 2013, a member explained that the EDL started 'through the football lads' and suggested that the EDL was an 'add-on' to the existing football hooligan

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<sup>1</sup> All names and divisional affiliations have been changed to protect anonymity.

movement. At a demonstration at Downing Street in 2013, a young man claimed that the rival football firms used to have frequent clashes, but they had now put their differences aside to support the EDL, and another concurred that now that members of rival football firms protested together for the EDL there had been a reduction in hooliganism because 'when you know someone, you're not about to punch them'.

EDL demonstrations were usually met by counter-demonstrations, mostly by the anti-fascist group, United Against Fascism (UAF), and sometimes by Islamic groups. Further opportunities for confrontation and violence were provided by the police, who either separated the rival groups or sought to control EDL demonstrators. Disturbances between EDL members and UAF activists were witnessed on a number of demonstrations. Often most EDL supporters ignored formal speeches at protests and instead confronted counter-demonstrators and/or the police. At a demonstration in the centre of Birmingham in July 2013 numerous scuffles between EDL and UAF activists were witnessed and a number of EDL members came away bleeding from head wounds. EDL members near the police line that separated the two groups threw objects such as bottles and rocks. EDL members were observed sniffing and eating a white powder (we assume either amphetamine or cocaine) before moving to the front of the demonstration to aggressively taunt police and counter-demonstrators. Accordingly, we conclude that EDL street protests are likely to appeal to football hooligans because of the opportunities for violent conflict at these events.

Showing his intuitive grasp of the appeal this violence may have had for its membership base, Allan told the audience at the King's Lynn meet-and-greet that he got a 'buzz' from attending demonstrations and explained: 'it's better than any football game I've ever been

to'. The same tacit acknowledgement of the opportunity for violent conflict provided by EDL demonstrations is captured in Figure 1 below:

**Figure 1: Facebook post by EDL Divisional Leader regarding Birmingham 2013 demonstration**





For EDL members with links to football hooliganism an important benefit of participation in the organisation was the access to violence that it provided. The supply of opportunities for violence may be significant because there is evidence that violence can be hard to initiate – most people will avoid violent situations and those with a desire to engage in violence may want to minimise the risk of serious harm or criminal consequences. Violence may be most effectively supplied in a club that ensures exclusive participation and minimises the possibility that others may defect (by either informing law enforcement agents or withdrawing under attack and thereby leaving the remaining participants exposed to greater risk of serious injury) (Collins, 2008; Leeson *et al*, 2012). Moreover, as discussed below, violence in the name of a cause may be more purposeful and therefore more satisfying to the perpetrator.

The violence and disorder at EDL protests may have particularly appealed to football hooligans because it coincided with more effective policing at football matches (which made traditional football violence more costly in terms of the risk of arrest and criminal punishment), greater use of banning orders prohibiting known hooligans from attending matches, and rising ticket prices at football grounds that may have priced out supporters on low incomes (Copsey, 2010; Treadwell and Gardland, 2011).

However, throughout the fieldwork a number of members expressed reservations about the group's violent elements. Samantha complained: 'They come here to start trouble and they're not true patriots'. Not every member of the EDL joins the organisation in order to engage in violence, but these individuals are nevertheless willing to participate in a group in which more than a third of members have prior involvement in football hooliganism, in

which a majority of members engage in obscene and abusive chanting in public targeted at minority populations, and whose events are marked by frequent violent disorder. Whilst the participation of these individuals may be driven by the consumption of the other benefits discussed below, they are nevertheless willing to tolerate violent and aggressive behaviour.

### ***Self-worth***

Lamont (2000) contends that working-class men construct a sense of self-worth by upholding certain moral standards that affirm their dignity independently of their low socioeconomic status. We similarly found that EDL participation is couched in moral terms – particularly, the duty to protect one’s family and one’s country – that provides its predominantly working-class members with a heightened sense of their own self-worth.

The first moral standard that EDL participation purports to uphold is protecting one’s family: an essential criterion of Lamont’s (2000, p. 20) working men’s definition of success.

However, unlike Lamont’s participants, the purported threat facing the family is not street crime or a bad neighbourhood: it is Islam. During Allan’s address to the audience at the King’s Lynn meet-and-greet, his eyes fell upon a mother who was nursing a 10-week-old baby girl. He paused, and said, ‘If they [the Islamists] have their way, that baby will be wearing a burqa’, to which one audience member replied, ‘No fucking way!’ At the Wolverhampton meet-and-greet, the divisional leader told the audience, ‘I’m not much of a public speaker... but I’m doing the EDL for my children and grandchildren because I don’t want them to be taken to mosques as part of their school excursions and I don’t want to see my granddaughter wearing a burqa or being punished for wearing a short skirt’. During the

Birmingham demonstration, Darren – a Facebook administrator for the Leicester division – also revealed that he thought his family could be protected by his EDL participation when he stated that ‘Cameron won’t stand up for us, so we have to stand up; if we don’t stand up, it will be my children, and I’d rather it be me than my children’.

The organisation itself promotes the idea that participation will enable members to protect their families, as the EDL promotional material presented in Figure 2 below shows:

**Figure 2: Official EDL Promotional Material for Demonstration in Rotherham on 10 May 2014**



*Caption: ‘We march with the children of today to protect the children of tomorrow’*

In addition to safeguarding their families, EDL membership increases self-worth by purportedly providing participants with an opportunity to protect their country. Indeed, EDL

participation is presented as analogous to being a soldier of war. The very name 'English Defence League' connotes quasi-military action to safeguard the country against Islam. Many EDL members (both men and women) wear branded clothing that states their division, emblazoned with the words, 'Loyal Footsoldier'. At the King's Lynn meet-and-greet, decorations included metre-long flags emblazoned with 'RIP Lee Rigby', and a poster that read 'We are at War'. In language that sought to evoke the spirit of a military homecoming, Darren publicly recounted a time when two elderly women bystanders at a protest unfurled a flag when the EDL members walked past and cheered them on, and another time when a war veteran attended a demonstration with his medals. Darren acknowledged that 'it's at times like that' he remembered 'why he is part of the EDL'.

EDL leaders also reinforce the military analogy and suggest that participation is necessary to ensure the safety of the country. Allan told the crowd at the King's Lynn meet-and-greet that 'some people say it's too late to stop the spread of Islam in the UK'. However, he pointed out that if Churchill had listened to the people who said it was too late to stop Nazism, then, 'he wouldn't have fought it'. Furlow and Goodall (2011) observe that a reverence surrounds war whereby tasks done in its furtherance are considered grander and more meaningful than would otherwise be the case. To have their membership likened to a soldier of war is therefore likely to increase the self-worth of those active in the EDL.

Given this analogy, it might be expected that violence undertaken under the auspices of the EDL will be interpreted as a strike against the enemy and confer greater self-worth than more 'everyday' or random violence. Indeed, Treadwell and Garland's (2011, p. 630) respondents did report that racist violence undertaken as EDL members was more

meaningful than their other experiences of violence. One respondent in their study explained: 'I see what I done, when I did [assaulted] that Paki [Muslim], as special... It was personal... in a way that football violence is not... I was proud afterwards. It made me feel like I'd made a stand'. The access to violent conflict and increased self-worth offered by EDL membership may be understood to be mutually reinforcing. Violence against the perceived enemies of England is legitimatised and glorified and enhances the self-worth of the group members taking a stand against those enemies.

Lamont contends that upholding certain moral values provides working-class men with a source of self-worth that is an alternative to socioeconomic status. Because EDL members are generally of low socioeconomic standing, they may particularly value the self-worth bestowed by EDL participation. Additionally, young men who may otherwise have little meaning or cause for pride in their lives may re-imagine themselves as heroic freedom fighters and then engage in violent acts that seemingly confirm that special status, thereby bolstering their sense of self-worth.

### ***Group solidarity***

The third club good that the EDL supplies to its members is group solidarity: the opportunity to be part of a close-knit group united by the belief that they are fighting for a common and just cause. Wintrobe (2006, p. 26) observes that solidarity connotes unity and oneness of purpose, and that a need for group identification appears to be a fundamental characteristic of human beings. Hence, group solidarity, and the strong social connections it implies, is a personal benefit that may motivate individual participation in collective action.

The fieldwork generated plenty of evidence of group solidarity within the EDL. Talking in the pub after a Leicester demonstration, Jackson, a young man and father, said that he'd trust his fellow divisional members with his life and with his kids, and pointed to members around the bar and repeatedly declared: 'I'd trust him with my kids'. At another meeting in Leicester, 16 year-old Eddy – a former EDL member who remains on good terms with his division – said that the other guys in the group were 'proper tough', and that they looked after him on demos and bought him drinks. He said: 'It's like a big family, everyone looks after everyone and that was something I liked about it.' Similarly, at the Manchester national demonstration, Samantha explained: 'It's like a family, an extended family'.

The same point is publicly emphasised by EDL higher-ups. In his speech at King's Lynn, Allan warned that members will lose friends from being part of the EDL, but said that when they go to a demo, 'you go as brothers and sisters'. He talked about getting the coach to the upcoming Birmingham demonstration, and said that when members travel on the coach they 'are like a family', and told them 'you have to respect that you will be travelling as part of a family'. Allan went on to claim that an important principle of the EDL was that its members will never leave anyone behind after an event. He described how once at a demo a member did not return to the coach and the others refused to leave until he was found – and said to audience laughter that it turned out that the man had passed out drunk.

This powerful sense of group solidarity was said to extend to protecting EDL members who were threatened by local Muslims. Allan also used his King's Lynn speech to let members know that, 'if you are in trouble, the EDL will look after you'. He said that if Muslims

threatened an EDL member, that member would just have to make one phone call to have 30 EDL members at their house. Jerry – the King’s Lynn divisional leader – interjected to explain to the group that after Muslims hit a female member in the face, a group of EDL members offered to come to her house to protect her.

The sense of solidarity within the EDL was further accentuated by the similar clothing worn by members. Like the hooligan ‘casuals’ (Treadwell, 2008), some male members of the EDL wore expensive designer clothing to demonstrations, usually Fred Perry polo shirts, jeans or combat trousers, and Adidas training shoes. As noted above, the EDL also sold its own branded clothing that was worn by many members, notably hoodies, t-shirts and singlets with the EDL logo and slogans such as ‘Loyal Footsoldier’, and, for female members, ‘Angels Division’. The clothes worn by EDL members are an important signal of the members’ commitment to the organisation. To travel to and from a demonstration wearing EDL-branded clothing invites stigmatisation by others (discussed below) and therefore constitutes an important display of loyalty to the group.

Another dimension of group solidarity was that EDL members often seemed to approach protests as social events – evidence consistent with Lichbach’s (1994, p. 31) prediction that among dissident groups that overcome the collective action dilemma ‘[o]rganizational meetings and protest demonstrations will often include food, drink, and entertainment’. At most protests many members drank heavily, even those who did not appear 18 years-of-age. Most demonstrations commenced or concluded with a visit to the pub, which provided members with an opportunity to drink and socialise. Often members continued to drink as they returned to the train or tube station and there was frequent talk of arrests for

drunkenness. Busher similarly (2015) describes witnessing extensive drunkenness as a feature of his time with the EDL.

Senior actors within the EDL deliberately emphasised the social benefits of activism. For example, Figure 3 overleaf is a Facebook post made by a divisional leader inviting members to a social event at which there would be 'food laid on and a raffle' and where 'families are more than welcome to come along as well'.

### **The costs of participation**

As well as the benefits described above, like all political activity, EDL membership also imposes costs. It can cost time, money, and friends, and lead to members being subjected to unwanted police scrutiny. Throughout the fieldwork, many members acknowledged their participation was a stigmatised activity. At the Manchester national demonstration, Samantha said that none of her family or friends outside the EDL attended demonstrations and while she is proud of her involvement with the organisation, she does not promote it because of fears about people's reaction. She later said that she had worked as a carer for local woman, and, when she told the woman she was attending her hometown's EDL demonstration, the woman had called her a Nazi 'and crossed me off her Christmas card list'. Another member explained that he knew many people in his local area from 'working the doors' (i.e., as a bouncer), yet those same people now 'close their curtains or hide in a doorway' to avoid him.



Figure 3: Facebook post by EDL Divisional Leader 2013



The stigma of EDL membership can impact all sorts of relationships. Many members admitted they had lost friends because of their involvement and others feared losing their jobs if their membership was discovered. Even close family relationships can be affected. Allan revealed: 'I haven't spoken to my Mum for four years because she said that she wouldn't speak to me while I'm part of the EDL. I said, OK, and haven't spoken to her since, and she won't answer the phone when I call'.

EDL members are aware that much of the stigma they encounter is derived from the perception that the group is racist. Many EDL members were eager to portray themselves as anti-racist and tolerant of ethnic minorities. This was often done through claims of having family and friends of different races. A young member of the Yorkshire division who was observed harassing a Muslim man on the tube after a protest in London nevertheless asserted, 'I'm not racist. I don't have a problem with Sikhs or Hindus or Jews or gays and lesbians'. Members were keen to pose for photographs with the few Sikhs who attended EDL demonstrations, and gave a warm welcome to the group's only Muslim member. Berman and Laitin (2008) suggest that stigma may act as an important commitment device that benefits an organisation as a whole by screening out those not strongly committed to the group, but it is nevertheless costly to individuals and therefore members try to reduce this cost by explicitly challenging the principal basis upon which they are stigmatised.

It is important to reconcile the seemingly contradictory propositions that EDL membership confers benefits of increased self-worth and imposes costs of stigma. EDL members espouse a narrative in which they are heroic fighters standing up to Islamic extremism, but this narrative is not shared outside the EDL. On the contrary, outside the EDL the organisation is

often viewed negatively as a racist, fascist and/or mindlessly violent group. The incongruence between these two accounts may reinforce the EDL's group solidarity and the internal narrative that they are a persecuted minority standing alone against the forces of evil.

Stigma can therefore be a double-edged sword that provides both costs and benefits. As Jasper (2004, p. 8) observes in the context of the development of social movements, 'the very stigma that undermines the group in the eyes of outsiders may be an important source of solidarity'. In the case of the EDL, stigma can simultaneously cause a member to lose friends, thereby strengthening bonds with fellow members as a result. At one pub outing with the Leicester division, a senior member acknowledged that group numbers had declined and that 'it's just the loyal lads left'. When asked whether the remaining members spend much time together, the group agreed that they did, with the same senior member explaining that it is *because* they have lost other friends from being part of the EDL that the group is so close.

EDL participation can also be costly in a literal sense. Former member Eddy said he had stopped attending demonstrations because it was too expensive: 'I sometimes spent as much as £60 to go on demos only to be battered by the police'. Another member said that he had stopped attending protests because he had started his own landscape architect business, and could not afford to turn down the £400 he could earn on a weekend to go to a demonstration. Another member complained that he had to cover the cost of a £600 fine he had received for inciting racial hatred when the police overheard his chants after a demonstration.

EDL membership can also be time consuming, especially for those who assume a leadership position. Jerry recounted that he sometimes spent as much as six hours on his laptop in the evening working for the EDL, despite the 12 hour shifts that his job as a delivery driver required. Other members tried to guard against EDL membership becoming too time-consuming. Darren said that his own EDL involvement did not take up too much time, but if it did, 'I'd need to take a step back and think about whether it's interfering with my job or my family and relationships'.

Unwanted police attention may also follow from EDL membership. Darren said that his house had been searched twice because of his EDL involvement and that 'because I live with my Mum, I don't like putting that on her'. The police had seized his laptops and phone, which had eventually been returned. Darren claimed a police officer had told him he was being targeted because he was part of the EDL. Darren said that police scrutiny had led to declining membership numbers. Other members claimed that they were subjected to police violence and criminal charges because of their EDL membership.

### **Benefits, costs and the dynamics of activism**

Our argument that only individuals for whom the costs of activism are outweighed by its benefits will participate in the EDL is strengthened by counterfactual data gathered during fieldwork. Several members revealed that they had family and friends who privately supported their activism, yet did not want to participate more actively because it might jeopardise their career. Darren said that although he had managed to persuade his mother

that the EDL 'isn't bad or racist', she was unable to 'support him officially' because she would lose her job as a teacher if her support became public. Darren also said he did not fear losing his job because he thinks that his managers at the warehouse are supportive of his EDL involvement, yet 'can't say so out loud because they'd be sacked'. Similarly, Evan – an employee at a printing factory – said that his mother is privately supportive of his EDL activities but does not make her support known 'because she has a job to hold on to'. By contrast, his father is apparently not bound by such constraints, and actively supports the EDL by sharing Internet content that Evan sends him. This counterfactual data strongly suggests that EDL sympathisers will not turn to activism if the cost (in this case, job loss) exceeds the benefits to be gained from activism. It is also worth noting that these examples suggest individuals with higher status jobs – for example, teachers and managers – are more likely to face employment sanctions than those with lower status jobs.

The benefits of EDL membership will appeal more to those individuals who enjoy violence and aggressive confrontation, have low self-worth and value the group solidarity the EDL offers. Accordingly, it should not be surprising that most EDL members are young men, often with links to football hooliganism, who are either unemployed or employed in low status occupations. The costs of EDL membership will similarly break down differently for different people. Individuals employed in a capacity where reputation for probity is salient, such as a professional occupation, will likely find the stigma that accompanies EDL membership to be prohibitively burdensome. For an unskilled worker, or a young person yet to reach a stage in their career where such a reputation is significant, that stigma will be less costly. For someone employed in a role in which a reputation for violence may be advantageous, such as a doorman, the stigma of membership may even be a positive

benefit. Accordingly, we should expect members of the EDL to fit the employment profile of largely young and unskilled workers. The costs of time and money seem to be significant on the margin: members may withdraw from the organisation, or reduce their involvement, if they believe it imposes an unacceptable financial or time burden. The cost of unwanted police attention seems to be significant for those who have attained a position within the EDL hierarchy, but for these individuals this cost does not seem sufficient to curtail their participation.

A lower level of involvement will reduce the costs of participation, although fewer benefits will also accrue. An individual who posts pro-EDL content on Facebook or Twitter, perhaps using a pseudonym, for example, may experience little stigma and incur little financial cost, but the benefits of group solidarity and increased self-worth they obtain will also be limited, and the poster will not access violent conflict. Nevertheless, if the benefits of such limited activism outweigh the costs, then it can be anticipated to take place.

The evidence that EDL participation is driven by the benefits of solidarity, self-worth, and, most strikingly, the opportunity for violent conflict, raises the question of why EDL members looking to obtain these goods have not joined other groups that could also provide them, such as the smaller EDL splinter group the North West Infidels. Defection to the Infidels may have been rare because of the Infidels' white supremacist ideology. First, the costs of joining an overtly racist group will have been higher in terms of stigmatisation. Second, given that many EDL members encountered during fieldwork were at pains to stress their anti-racist credentials, the cost of obtaining ideological cohesion in order to obtain solidarity within the group would have been much higher within the Infidels than within the EDL for most

members. In the context of discussing neo-Nazi recruitment, Aho (1994, p. 126) notes that a 'candidate for neo-Nazism first "joins with" an agent and then begins subtly altering his beliefs so as to maintain this relationship'. Wintrobe (2006) similarly observes that a recruit may sacrifice some of their pre-existing beliefs in order to ensure their own ideology more closely resembles that of the group, thereby increasing the solidarity he or she receives from participation. Therefore, it will be less costly – that is, less belief sacrifice will be required – for a recruit to join a group with an ideology that resembles or does not run counter to their pre-existing views. While the North West Infidels may supply the same exclusive benefits as the EDL, for most members, receiving those benefits from the Infidels would be much more costly.

#### **First and additional units of collective action and the decline of the EDL**

The success of the EDL in organising a large number of well-attended demonstrations over a number years shows that it successfully supplied the first unit of collective action, but in our view the way that this was achieved by securing the participation of many young men with low occupational status and a liking for violent conflict and drinking made it extremely difficult for the organisation to supply additional units of collective action – that is, to grow beyond that membership demographic and build more mainstream support.

The fieldwork for this study took place at a time when the appeal of the EDL appeared to be waning and senior actors appeared to be struggling to regulate the aggression and drug use that often characterised the group's demonstrations. Senior figures chastised members for behaviour that might reflect badly on the EDL, such as fighting, drinking, drug taking, and

obscene or racist chanting, on the grounds that such behaviour might discourage new members from joining the organisation. For example, a speaker at a demonstration in Leicester said that he didn't want to 'see any balaclavas' or 'hear any stupid chants' at that day's protest and continued, 'that's why we'll win, because we'll appeal to the man on the street, who won't be worried to tell his kids he's part of the EDL'. Jerry posted on his division's closed Facebook page to remind members that 'the coach [to the next demonstration] is going to be drug free, so if you all rather go by train because you can't go 2 hours without it, feel free to do so'. Allan also used Facebook to admonish members for their drunken antics, claiming that such behaviour is 'the only thing failing the EDL'. Busher (2015, pp. 115-116) similarly observed that regulating violent and drunken behaviour at demonstrations was an ongoing concern of EDL organisers.

However, senior members were inconsistent in their calls for sobriety and peaceful protest. Before a protest in Birmingham when there was significant disorder and clashes with counter-demonstrations, both Jerry and Allan tacitly encouraged the belief that this protest would provide an opportunity for violence, telling members not to bring their kids and to expect trouble. Further, the decision of senior actors to hold meet-and-greet sessions and social gatherings at pubs surely encouraged alcohol consumption. Such ambiguity may be explained by the fact that the supply of violence and the opportunity to drink and take drugs was initially necessary to attract members and thereby supply the first unit of collective action, but by 2013, senior figures were increasingly conscious that the behaviour associated with EDL protests compromised the ability of the organisation to grow further and attain mainstream political influence, even as they understood the appeal that such behaviour held for existing members.



## Conclusion

This article has extended existing understanding of how the collective action framework can explain participation in extremist organisations by applying this analysis to the EDL. Original ethnographic research has shown that the EDL supplies its members with the exclusive club goods of access to violence, increased self-worth and group solidarity. These benefits of EDL membership must be offset against the costs of participation. Only those individuals for whom the cost-benefit calculus is positive will become actively involved. As part of this discussion, we argued that the way the EDL has supplied the first unit of collective action compromised its ability to supply additional units. The group 'got off the ground' by attracting many young white men with low status, a propensity to engage in violence, drinking and drug use, and who value the group solidarity that the EDL offers, but this limited its ability to expand further.

In arguing that the provision of club goods motivates EDL participation, we have challenged conventional explanations of EDL participation that suggest members are principally motivated by fears of Muslim dominance of the UK. These concerns – and other Islamophobic sentiments – are widely held and therefore cannot solely explain the comparatively rare decision to join the EDL. Instead, we have sought to demonstrate that while Islamophobic ideology is an important unifying theme, and it facilitates the supply of exclusive benefits, Islamophobia does not motivate membership. Rather, participation is motivated by the opportunity to obtain the club goods that the EDL supplies. Isolating the ways in which the benefits of EDL participation outweigh its cost for some but not others

sheds light on the factors that separate EDL members from the many xenophobic and pessimistic white men who do not similarly participate. An effective policy response to right-wing extremism must not only understand the ideology around which such groups coalesce, but also how such organisations solve the collective action problem inherent to all political activity.

## **Appendix**

### ***Research Methodology***

This study is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted within the English Defence League (EDL) between February 2013 and February 2014. Nine EDL demonstrations were attended, both local and national, in English cities including Manchester, London, Newcastle, Birmingham, and Slough. Through attending multiple EDL demonstrations, a rapport was developed with regional and divisional EDL leaders, which resulted in invitations to two private 'meet-and-greet' sessions for new and prospective members, social gatherings at pubs, and membership of a closed EDL division's Facebook group.

In total, approximately 50 hours were spent directly interacting with EDL members. This access to the EDL enabled participant observation at EDL demonstrations, 'meet and greet' events, informal pub gatherings, and during travel to and from demonstrations; unstructured, informal interviews with individual and small groups of EDL grassroots members and leaders; and 'scrutiny' and critical analysis of the content of EDL official statements, speeches and comments on its private Facebook pages. The study is therefore

ethnographic, defined by Gobo (2011, p. 16) as being characterised by ‘observing, watching, seeing, looking at, gazing at and scrutinising’, with an emphasis on participant observation.

The dates and locations of fieldwork, and the members informally interviewed at demonstrations and social gatherings, are as follows:

***National Demonstrations***

- Manchester (2 March 2013) – interviewed Samantha;
- Newcastle (25 May 2013) – interviewed Samantha and Jerry;
- Downing Street (27 May 2013) – interviewed Evan and Dean;
- Old Bailey (31 May 2013) – interviewed Jerry and Hannah;
- Birmingham (20 July 2013) – interviewed Samantha, Darren and Jamie;
- Tower Hamlets (7 September 2013) – interviewed Anthony; and
- Slough (1 February 2014) – interviewed Samantha

***Local demonstrations (locations have been changed to protect anonymity)***

- Derby (25 February 2013) – interviewed Samantha, Anne and Allan; and
- Leicester (30 March 2013) – interviewed Victoria, Martin, Darren and Jackson;

***Social gatherings (locations have been changed to protect anonymity)***

- Leicester (20 April 2013) – a meeting at the pub that was arranged over Facebook, at the division’s initiation, interviewed Victoria, Darren, Eddy and Jamie;

- Wolverhampton (15 June 2013) – a meet-and-greet session for new and prospective members held at a pub, interviewed Samantha, Jacqueline, Jerry, Marshall, Robert and Allan; and
- King's Lynn (6 July 2013) – a meet-and-greet session for new and prospective members held at a pub, interviewed Samantha and Jerry.

Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the King's College London Law Research Ethics Panel prior to commencement of fieldwork. The research was carried out pursuant to REP-L/12/13-15. The EDL members involved in direct interactions during fieldwork were aware of the researcher's status. However, the largely anonymous nature of demonstrations – and the crowds they attracted – meant that identification of the researcher was not always possible. This allowed observation of interactions between EDL members without drawing attention to the role of the researcher.

Data sets generated comprised field notes of observations, transcripts of interviews and speeches, and the content of the EDL mission statement and Facebook pages. Standard methods of thematic analysis were used, whereby material was coded, summarised and interpreted. Each set of field notes/individual transcript/document/posting was read and reviewed several times, after which key statements linked to themes (e.g., solidarity, violence, stigma) were coded and then highlighted. Some statements related to more than one theme. Next, all text relating to each theme was moved into a single file. The content within these files was analysed for consistency and difference across the data sets. Thus, similar patterns (and exceptions) in relation to specific concepts could be identified across

the full sample, enabling summaries to be prepared. Attempts were made to reflect with honesty the level of agreement across the sample, and to consider contradictory views.

Observation at demonstrations and group events enabled the researcher to overhear conversations and also to witness body language, signage, violence, and drug and alcohol consumption. Interviews enabled the researcher to guide the conversation and hear views expressed through lines of questioning, but observation of body language was also possible. Scrutiny of documents and speeches involved searching for concepts expressed both explicitly and implicitly, enabling the pinpointing of inconsistencies between these two sources, as well as between these and the views expressed by members in the field.

When conducting research for *The Racist Mind*, Ezekiel (1995, p. 4) attended rallies and get-togethers of the American white racist movement and reflected: 'I could hear how members talked to one another, the kind of language they used, the sorts of trust and mistrust they showed... I learned a lot by hanging around'. The ethnographic approach to studying the EDL conferred similar benefits. It was possible to listen to speeches delivered by elite members, document the demographics of supporters, and see both the EDL-branded clothing worn and the head wounds members received when fighting with the police. Interactions that took place between members, with the police, and (occasionally) with Muslims, were observed, and members were witnessed using and dealing drugs. As becomes apparent throughout this article, a great deal was learned from 'hanging around' the EDL.

The literature on right-wing extremism reveals the value of and need for ethnographic studies that take the researcher inside the movement. Blee (2007, p. 121) notes that 'internalist' studies of far-right movements are rare, yet it is precisely this type of research that provides a more thorough understanding of the subjective motivations and perspectives of far-right activists and supporters. In his own rich ethnography of the EDL, Busher (2015, p. 10) observes that 'by exploring the internal logics of anti-minority activism, we become better able to hone our thinking about how we develop appropriate and effective ways of responding to and managing the impacts of anti-minority politics'. We share this view, and agree with Jorgenson's (1989, pp. 12-13) contention that participant observation is particularly appropriate when studying a 'hidden' (i.e., deviant) phenomenon.

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